

Greetings, St. Mark Family,

May 3, 2024

As most are aware, the postponed 2020 General Conference of the United Methodist Church is presently convening in Charlotte, North Carolina. The General Conference is the primary legislative and governing body of the denomination. Clergy and lay have been meeting since April 23, planning for and voting on the future of the United Methodist Church. I would like to address two important decisions made by the delegates at the General Conference earlier this week.

First, On May 1, at the morning plenary session, the General Conference voted to lift the forty year ban on the ordination of practicing homosexuals and clergy performing same sex weddings. The Vote was overwhelming at 692-51 (93%). It was included with a bulk of other legislation. This is indeed a significant shift.

Contention around the issue of human sexuality has existed in the UMC since the 1972 General Conference. Over the last several years there have been many changes in the UMC, including the disaffiliation of over 7000 churches from the denomination. What this change means is that if a local church wants to perform same sex weddings they will now be able to do so. In addition, an annual conference is now permitted to ordain "self avowed practicing homosexuals." The messaging from General Conference has been that this legislation brings the Book of Discipline to neutral language concerning human sexuality.

What it does not mean is that a church has to do anything. There were no mandates passed at the General Conference that would force clergy to perform same sex weddings or for local churches to accept a self avowed practicing homosexual pastor. So, neither I nor Andy would be required to do anything against our conscience. It will remain up to us what weddings we will officiate. Therefore, in the immediate future, nothing will change for St. Mark.

Secondly, in the afternoon plenary session on May 1, by a vote of 516 to 203, General Conference effectively ended disaffiliation. They struck paragraph 2553 from the Book of Discipline and ended any possibility of its future use. This paragraph was added to the discipline at the 2019 special called General Conference that attempted to put the issue of human sexuality to rest in the UMC. It allowed churches to leave the denomination over issues of conscience surrounding the issue, only after meeting certain financial requirements.

In actuality, paragraph 2553 expired on December 31, 2023. The effort at this General Conference was to extend and expand disaffiliation, largely for churches outside the

U.S. to have the opportunity to leave the denomination. This does not mean, however, there are no options for St. Mark in light of the recent changes.

At the South Georgia Annual Conference in 2022, the conference board of trustees approved a measure to extend the ability to leave the denomination in light of what might happen at the postponed 2020 General Conference. Using an existing paragraph in the Book of Discipline (Paragraph 2549) that gives annual conferences absolute power to close churches, a church can vote to leave the UMC. The church would still have to meet the identical financial obligations that were required in the expired paragraph 2553. This has always been the mechanism that St. Mark would employ in the event the church voted to leave the UMC. It is no longer referred to as *disaffiliation* but *departure*. These details are included in the resolution on departure that the St. Mark Church Council approved last year (this can be viewed on our website). Our Bishop, Rev. David Graves, has repeatedly communicated his and the Trustees' commitment to honor that agreement.

We are in a season of consecration and discernment. Together we are diving deep into prayer, the holy scriptures, and fasting to align ourselves with the heart of God. I ask that you lean even more into those practices. These changes are significant and we want to move forward in God's will and God's timing. Keep sowing into St. Mark. God has a good plan. Trust in Jesus and remember these words of scripture (from today's Proverb in our corporate Bible reading plan).

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;*

*in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.*

- Proverbs 3:5-6

Blessings in Christ,

Pastor Jeremy